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ABSTRACT

A policy statement by the Committee on Agricultural and Rural Development of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) is presented. The mission of AASCU institutions involved in education and rural development includes to help strengthen the rural population and to dispel its isolation, reduce its poverty, link it to the global economy, and sustain its values. Many rural communities today are collapsing under the pressures of farm foreclosures, declining markets for traditional natural resource based industries, and devolution of traditional federal and state government responsibilities. Colleges can play a major role in building the capacity of the rural population to deal with current economic/educational problems. The following are some of the nine guidelines for AASCU institutions involved in service to rural communities: (1) they must understand the unique nature of the problems and believe in the peoples' determination and participation in the planning of education; (2) they should facilitate self-help; (3) higher education should assist the agricultural and natural resources sector of the country to survive in this technological world; (4) adult and continuing education should be continued; and (5) emerging distance learning technologies are a major part of the solution to overcoming rural isolation. Rural students are entitled to equity, both in quality of education and the variety of choices available. (SM)

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The following policy statement was developed by the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities and approved by the association membership at the 28th annual meeting on November 22, 1988.

Rural America stands today at a crossroads. The urbanization of the United States over the past 150 years of our history has called forth the description of the rural population as the "people" who were left behind." While there was a brief resurgence of interest in rural development in the 1970s, the prediction of a "rural turnaround" by the Carter Administration never took place. Today, many rural communities are collapsing under the combined pressures of farm foreclosures, declining markets for traditional natural resource-based industries (such as forest products and mining), declining employment in manufacturing (a major part of it due to competition from foreign countries), the need to provide additional public services to support an aging rural population base, and also the trend toward devolution of traditional federal and state government responsibilities.

The issues at the crossroads include whether towns of less than 1,000 will or can survive, what size school system is minimal for quality education for the future, what level of services for the poor and elderly can be provided at what distance from metropolitan service centers, and what kinds of existing new industries can profitably operate outside of the metropolitan areas of the country. With 30 percent of the U.S. population living at this time outside of metropolitan areas, and with the majority (57 percent) of AASCU institutions finding their locations within or closely adjacent to rural regions, there is a major role to be played by our colleges and universities in building the capacity of the rural population in order to deal with the economic/educational problems currently existing.

Historically, higher education has played a dominant role in rural development. Beginning

with the Morrill Act (1863), which established the land-grant universities, and continuing with the Smith-Lever Act (1914) and Smith-Hughes Act (1917), which established the Cooperative Extension Service and federally financed vocational education respectively, the nation invested heavily in equipping what was then the majority of the population with the necessary education and skills to enhance small communities. Many AASCU institutions grew from the Normal School movement which, at the turn of the century, trained school teachers for a growing nation.

Today less than two million people employed in rural America earn their living directly from agriculture, forestry, or fisheries. However, a substantial percentage of rural people are involved in the national stream of commerce created by agriculture and natural resource industries, both domestic and international. The rural America of today is facing issues far more complex and broadly encompassing than the narrowly defined agriculture issues of the first half of the century upon which much federal policy and higher education programming was based. The goals of full employment, economic development, adequate health care, and lifelong education are just as real and just as urgent for our people living on reservations, mining towns, wheat farms, retirement destination communities, and the newly emerging rural service hubs as they are for the urban dwellers who now form the decided majority.

The following are guidelines for AASCU institutions involved in service to rural communities:

1. Providing university services and programs to rural areas requires a clear understanding of the unique nature of the problems facing rural communities and a firm belief in the self-determination of rural peoples and their right of ownership and participation in the planning of education agendas.

2. Economic development can be characterized as having highly trained people with good technology trying to figure out what to do for other people. Community development is facilitating self-help and cooperation among the citizens of a community. It allows the issues of values and the quality of life to

be considered. Colleges and universities seeking to assist rural people will understand both concepts and will approach the problem-solving process in economic development within the value system of what is important to the members of the community.

3. Higher education should continue to assist the agricultural and natural resources sector of the country to survive in the highly technological, specialized, and competitive industrial world.

4. Adult and continuing education are catalysts for change in rural communities and are essential in building the capacity of rural leaders to develop and implement solutions to local problems. Skills training programs are important in a rapidly changing society. Of equal or greater importance is the concept of lifelong learning and the extension of academic degrees and professional credentials to place-bound rural adults.

5. Emerging distance-learning technologies are a major part of the solution to overcoming rural isolation and the high costs of serving a dispersed population. There must, however, be a high level of learner involvement in both the design and delivery of such distance learning programs. Again, the unique needs and values systems of diversified rural populations must be taken into consideration at all times. We must take into account the practicality of distance technology overcoming isolation, especially for those who do not have college degrees.

6. Special populations require special educational interventions and strategies, wherever they reside. The fact that illiteracy continues in rural America to the extent it does, is a cause for major concern for AASCU institutions. Inequity in the opportunities for jobs, education, and health care among the rural poor persists as a condition of American life despite many years of federal programs. A direct result of the farm crisis is the presence of thousands of unemployed called the "new rural poor." These individuals who have been displaced from their roots in farm, timber, and mining towns desire to remain in rural communities if they can support themselves and their families. Creative educational and economic development

strategies are imperative in order to assist them. The needs of minority populations in rural areas and the alarming problems of the elderly in small towns continue to call for higher education's special consideration and commitment.

7. Fragmentation of education and government services to rural communities has long been a problem. Today more than ever, the agenda for rural revitalization requires active collaboration and cooperation among all sectors of the education and public-service communities. High schools, technical institutes, community colleges/universities and land-grant universities need to actively pursue joint programs and the sharing of staff and resources to serve rural people. This collaboration should be evidenced in economic development programs as well as the delivery of distance learning programs.

8. While direct services and programs are of growing importance to small and rural communities, AASCU institutions are simultaneously being called upon to examine, revise, and expand their campus-based curricula, knowledge base, and research activity on behalf of rural America in transition. All students, regardless of their course of study, should understand the role of agriculture and natural resources in the U.S. and global economy.

9. AASCU institutions should help stimulate or actually provide the leadership to diversify rural economies. The same leadership should help retain in rural America the brightest and most ambitious of our young people.

All students should have an appreciation of the richness of the cultural diversity and heritage represented in rural America, past and present. Career preparation should include options for employment in rural areas, and there should be field-based training and practice within the curriculum that afford students the opportunity to make an informed and positive choice toward pursuing their careers in a rural setting. Faculties should be kept current on rural issues and in the institutional mission to serve rural communities.

Rural residents have been shortchanged in recent decades, and the time to improve learning

opportunities for rural Americans is now. Rural students are entitled to equity, both in the quality of education offered and in the variety of choices available. The best kind of education is one that rural learners have helped plan, execute, and evaluate. The mission of AASCU institutions involved in education and rural development is to strengthen our rural population and to help dispel their isolation, reduce their poverty, link them to the new global economy, and sustain the values that historically have placed rural people at the center of our democratic way of life.

The American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) is a leading higher education association that represents more than 370 public colleges and universities across the United States and in Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Virgin Islands.

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